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## **Taking gender and development seriously: supporting Pakistani women who work for rural development**

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**Abstract:** Development projects in Pakistan are hiring increasing numbers of Pakistani female professionals to work on rural projects that target women in addition to men. However, women development practitioners face many challenges in their work in remote areas. Many of the challenges relate to their gender, such as mobility restrictions placed on women and questions raised about their morality if they take up employment, in particular a job that includes fieldwork. This discourages qualified women from taking on such work. Development organisations must address this issue if they are to adequately serve their female target groups.

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## research evidence for policy



Without female development staff, it is difficult to target village women and provide them services such as sewing courses. Photo: Julia Grünenfelder (2007)

## Taking gender and development seriously: supporting Pakistani women who work for rural development

north  
NCCR  
south



The case study featured here was conducted in Pakistan.

### Policy message

- Pakistan is a highly gender-segregated society, and more well-qualified female professionals are needed to help deliver gender-sensitive development services in remote rural areas.
- Encouraging women to work in the rural development sector requires women-friendly conditions of employment and support mechanisms, such as professional networking and career progression.
- Development organisations must engage men and women both within project staff and in the target communities they serve when addressing gender issues. Gender relations are not a women-only issue.
- **Development projects in Pakistan are hiring increasing numbers of Pakistani female professionals to work on rural projects that target women in addition to men. However, women development practitioners face many challenges in their work in remote areas. Many of the challenges relate to their gender, such as mobility restrictions placed on women and questions raised about their morality if they take up employment, in particular a job that includes fieldwork. This discourages qualified women from taking on such work. Development organisations must address this issue if they are to adequately serve their female target groups.**
- **Development work as a new occupational field for well-educated Pakistani women**

level occupations previously reserved for men, for example as secretaries and cashiers.

Pakistani women have been employed in the development sector since the 1980s. While the number of development professionals in Pakistan remains unclear (Siddique and Ahmad 2012), development projects in Pakistan are hiring increasing numbers of professional Pakistani women to work on rural projects, often as social organisers. Typically, social organisers identify rural communities where a development project can be implemented, establish access to villagers, form and formalise community organisations (e.g. groups of women or men), carry out baseline surveys, and exchange information between

## Featured case study

### Gender, work, and development in north-west Pakistan

A case study on working environments of Pakistani female development practitioners (Grünenfelder 2012a) has highlighted the challenges facing women working in rural development projects in the Hazara region, north-west Pakistan. The study draws on field data collected in Pakistan over seven months between 2006 and 2008 and on methods of qualitative data analysis. It points out key features of gender relations and discrimination against women, and suggests ways to support female professionals in the rural development sector.

The study highlights that, as more and more Pakistani women enter the labour market, it is vital to understand the challenges they face in the workplace and to find out how best to address them. The development and humanitarian aid sectors provide opportunities to review the experiences of women in the workplace and to develop effective strategies to promote gender equality, both in Pakistan and elsewhere in the developing world (Hindman and Fechter 2011).

- community organisations, project staff, and other relevant actors in the development sector.
- The work is demanding, and to do it employees must be versed in local languages (as well as English in many cases) and be skilled in computing, data collection, and writing (Grünenfelder 2012a). Thus, social organisers are often university educated. Employers also typically call for “knowledge of the culture”, “cultural sensitivity,” as well as communication and interpersonal skills. Social organisers must be willing and able to travel to the field regularly, and occasionally elsewhere, e.g. for training and capacity building.
- They must also accept working in a mixed-gender environment.

#### Challenges experienced by Pakistani female development practitioners

- Despite a generally increasing presence of Pakistani women in the workplace and measures such as the federal Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, women still face many work-related obstacles, and rural development is a particularly challenging work environment (Siddique and Ahmad 2012).
- Research in the Hazara region (Grünenfelder 2012a, Grünenfelder 2012b) showed that Pakistani female development practitioners – many from middle-class backgrounds – faced challenges such as the following:

- ● While poor rural families often rely on income from their female members, middle-class families in Pakistan often discourage female family members from working if the family does not need the income. Thus, even – or especially – well-educated Pakistani women are not free from attitudes that constrain their occupational choices.
- ● It can be difficult for Pakistani women to find out about job opportunities in the rural development sector, especially if they themselves live in remote areas without private Internet access, as job postings typically appear on the Web and women are often forbidden from visiting Internet cafes. In general, women’s social and professional networks for accessing informal information about job opportunities are usually limited.

- ● Social norms limit women’s freedom to travel, a core requirement for social organisers. Women are often expected to be chaperoned by a man; if they travel alone, they risk being sexually harassed.
- ● Women social organisers face more difficulties than men in obtaining social access to villages. When seeking access to female villagers, women are often dependent on male colleagues to forge initial links with (male) village leaders who decide about collaboration with outside groups. Further, female social organisers are occasionally perceived as negative role models by both men and women in remote areas and are sometimes accused of being instruments of “a liberal Western agenda”.
- ● Verbal and physical attacks against development organisations, particularly against women staff, are not uncommon. Development organisations have been told that they must dismiss female staff or risk forced disruption of their work. In the study region, several women’s hostels were attacked, which led several NGOs to close them.
- ● Unattractive employment packages discourage women from remaining in the labour market for social organisers. Short-term contracts lack guarantees of social security such as maternity leave and cancellation periods for pregnant women. Accommodation is rarely provided to social organisers who work in remote areas; this is a challenge for women in particular, since finding socially acceptable living arrangements in remote places is more difficult for them than for men.
- ● For women, work as a social organiser usually does not offer enough prospects (e.g. career and income security) to outweigh the difficulties experienced in the workplace.

#### Consequences

These challenges discourage women from working in the rural development sector. This partly explains why it is difficult for projects to recruit well-qualified female staff. The shortage of

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candidates results in weak competition for jobs. Turnover of female staff within rural projects and organisations is high (especially in positions regarded as unattractive because they are located in remote places or places where people are hostile to development interventions). Overall, this hampers development efforts aimed at women beneficiaries, especially in rural areas, results in the loss of women's skills, and restricts potential growth of development organisations.

### **Supporting Pakistani women working in rural development**

Addressing the challenges facing Pakistani women in the workplace requires broad societal change and transformation of people's norms and values. While such processes are underway in Pakistan, they will take time. However, there are a number of ways in which women working in rural development can be supported more immediately. The following suggestions will provide maximum benefits if implemented together.

#### **Improve women's access to information**

Measures can be taken to make women more aware of job opportunities. These can include the establishment of Internet cafes for women in small towns to enable women to access online job portals and mailing lists. Male staff of development organisations can strive to integrate women in their professional networks. While women working in urban office settings can support one another when faced with challenges, female development practitioners working in remote areas do not have such support networks. Formal networks such as mentoring schemes could increase women's access to information and provide moral and practical support in places and situations where female employment is strongly restricted due to social norms.

#### **Improve female staff's work packages**

Contracts and employment packages can be tailored to women's needs, including provision of maternity leave and employment protection for pregnant women. Development organisations could work together to provide accommodation for women

working in remote areas, for example by establishing hostels in small towns where several development organisations work or by providing lists of trustworthy families who take in women as paying guests.

#### **Improve social recognition of professional women**

The role and status of professional women needs to be better recognised both in target communities and within development organisations. To support long-term societal change,

development organisations and state agencies should take the lead in improving gender relations within their own organisations. Both men and women should be engaged in debates on gender equality – debates that encourage women and men to tackle gender inequalities jointly. Senior staff and those in top management – usually men – should introduce career-development strategies for women at junior levels and actively speak out against sexual harassment of female colleagues.



Villages are often accessible on foot only. Physical hardship is less socially accepted for women than for men in Pakistani society. Photo: Julia Grünenfelder (2007)

### **Definitions**

**Gender relations** regulate appropriate roles, responsibilities, resources, and values assigned to women and men in a given context and at a certain time. For example, they regulate the spaces (e.g. work environments) and social roles deemed acceptable for Pakistani men and women.

**Labour force** – according to Pakistan's official definition in the Labour Force Survey – comprises all persons 10 years of age and above who fulfil the requirements to be deemed as employed or unemployed during the week preceding the date of interview.



A village in which social organisers do fieldwork. In Pakistan's highly gender-segregated society, only female staff can approach female clients adequately. Photo: Siddhi Manandhar (2008)

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## Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

### Tackling gender relations within development organisations

Improving gender relations and the recognition of professional women within development organisations will improve efforts to support both women in target communities and those who want to take up formal employment. Hence, they will make development efforts more inclusive, foster equal employment opportunities for women, and enable development organisations to grow through the recruitment of female staff.

### Supporting female development staff

Encouraging well-qualified Pakistani women to work as development practitioners in rural places will require women-friendly employment packages and supportive policies, such as on-the-job training and mentoring of new female social organisers by senior female colleagues and provision of lists of trustworthy families who take female staff as paying guests. Providing female staff with accommodation close to their workplace would reduce their problems with commuting, such as the risk of being sexually harassed.

### Involving everyone in gender issues

Gender relations and gender equality can and must be addressed by a multitude of actors, including politically active individuals and organisations, donors, and employers. Men and women must work together to create a supportive environment in which women can work. Gender and development activities – so far mainly targeted towards female community groups – must also be implemented by male staff in male community groups or in mixed-gender village groups. Donors, employers, and male staff must accept responsibility for working towards more gender equality, not only in target communities, but also in development organisations, development projects, and government structures. The introduction by the organisation or project of a code of conduct against sexual harassment of women in the workplace (AASHA 2012) is one measure that could be implemented easily.

### Further reading

Grünenfelder J. 2012a. *Gender, Work and Development in Northwest Pakistan. Working Environments of Pakistani Female Development Practitioners* [PhD dissertation]. Zurich, Switzerland: University of Zurich.

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Siddique MH, Ahmad MM. 2012. Variables affecting fieldworkers of NGOs in Pakistan. *Development in Practice*, 22(2): 216–228.

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